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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABIDJAN 000864

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SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: PRESIDENT ANNOUNCES IDENTIFICATION,
CALLS FOR QUICK ELECTIONS

Classified By: Charge d'affaires, a.i. Vicki Huddleston for
Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a televised address to the nation on August 6, the eve of Cote d'Ivoire's anniversary of independence, President Gbagbo announced the resumption of the public identification hearings ("audiences foraines"), pledged his commitment to fair, transparent and open elections, and called for elections by December 2007. Opposition leaders and observers have reacted with skepticism that elections are possible by the end of the year. In a August 3 meeting with Emboffs, former deputy High Representative for Elections Hrair Balian predicted that Gbagbo would call for early elections and expressed concern that the government will use a shortened identification process to identify only a couple of thousand voters rather than the approximately 2 million missing from the electoral rolls. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) In an August 6 televised address to the nation on the eve of Cote d'Ivoire's 47th anniversary of independence, President Gbagbo pledged his commitment to fair, transparent and open elections. Gbagbo congratulated Prime Minister Soro and his government for organizing the July 30 "Flame of Peace" ceremony in Bouake. He also thanked the visiting heads of state and foreign delegations who attended the ceremony and especially saluted President Thabo Mbeki for his part in mediating the conflict and first bringing President Compaore of Burkina Faso together with Gbagbo in Ouagadougou in September 2006. President Gbagbo discussed the Ouagadougou Political Agreement (OPA) and outlined his vision for elections, emphasizing that the war is over and announcing that Cote d'Ivoire is ready for elections. He noted, "In Bouake, we turned the page of war. We made a commitment to build peace. However, in a democracy, you build peace through elections....For me, the elections are, from now on, the only objective from which the rest of the peace process should be launched." He pledged that if Ivoirians show good faith, presidential elections could be organized by December 2007.

¶3. (U) President Gbagbo also announced the resumption of the identification hearings ("audiences foraines") and devoted a third of his speech to the purpose of the hearings and who could attend them. He emphasized that the hearings will issue birth certificates only and not render certificates of nationality. He argued that the 2006 audiences foraines failed because people wanted them to have an objective other than that provided for by the law and emphasized that not everyone can take part in the public hearings. Gbagbo said that persons born in Cote d'Ivoire, whether they are Ivoirian or not, who already have birth certificates should not take part in the identification hearings. He said only persons born in Cote d'Ivoire who have never been registered can take part. President Gbagbo carefully tied the success of the identification hearings to fair elections. He noted, "We

want elections in order to come out of the crisis, but we want clean elections. We want that the person who wins be effectively the choice of the majority of Ivoirians. That is why we are opposed to fraud. During these public hearings, all those found guilty of false testimonies or falsification of administrative documents will be sued, judged and condemned." He continued with a call to judges to follow the law and the spirit of the OPA. Gbagbo said: "I therefore call on the judges appointed in accordance with our laws and the Ouagadougou accord to show rigor and a sense of the nation to carry out their mission in the strict respect of the law in order to enable our country to consolidate the gains of the peace process."

14. (C) Opposition leaders and observers are largely skeptical of the President's call for quick elections. In public remarks, Parti Democratique de Cote d'Ivoire (PDCI) leader Alphonse Djedje Mady placed the onus for good faith on President Gbagbo, asserting that Gbagbo must carry out the steps necessary to hold credible elections -- namely voter identification and registration and disarmament. Emboffs met with Hrair Balian, former deputy High Representative for Elections on August 3. Balian is in Cote d'Ivoire on TDY to set up the elections certification cell in the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG). Balian noted that the Ivoirian government is in no shape to hold elections soon. He expressed concern that Gbagbo would call for quick elections (which Gbagbo did on August 6) and only identify a couple of hundred thousand voters in the audiences foraines and not the approximately 2 million who are estimated to be missing from the electoral rolls. He noted that 25 jurisdictions are currently conducting identification but that the government still lacks the capacity to carry out a full identification program. Balian will recommend to the UN that detailed benchmarks not be set

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up for the elections and that the UN not issue reports after each step in the process. Balian said silence can be interpreted as acquiescence that the process is proceeding properly. Balian noted that the UN should allow local actors to take corrective action regarding problems with the elections before the UN issues critical public statements.

15. (C) Comment: Leaders in Korhogo in the north are extremely skeptical of the proposed identification process because their party, the RDR, was not included in the Ouaga talks and Gbagbo's actions are suspect. However, as the identification process has not yet begun it is too early to make a judgment. But one issue of concern is that there is little attempt to inform citizens about what constitutes Ivoirian citizenship. In this regard the citizen identification project that is being proposed to the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) could be very useful. Acting SRSG Abou Moussa told Charge August 9 that President Gbagbo knows that elections cannot be held in December and called for them in order to deflect allegations that he does not support elections. Moussa said that, for technical reasons, elections cannot be held until March 2008. While international observers and the opposition are wary of Gbagbo's intentions, there is widespread belief that Gbagbo's sudden rush to elections is in sharp contrast to his earlier political tactics which were seen by many to have led to the cancellation of two UNSC resolution-mandated elections in 2005 and 2006. End Comment.

HUDDLESTON